

WRITING IN GAELIC: ALTERNATIVE AGENDAS

Christopher Whyte

The article outlines a series of considerations which matured in the course of my work as a writer in Gaelic over more than three decades. It draws on what Rilke wrote about an accusation of being “unpatriotic” because he chose not to live in a German-speaking community, whereas he finds that precisely not being surrounded by the language he is writing in creates nearly ideal circumstances for making poetry with it. The usefulness of replacing “minority” with “minoritized” as descriptive qualifier is discussed, citing the example of Marina Tsoetaeva in 1930s Paris. The “symptomatology” of a “majoritized” language is outlined, with certain deleterious effects this may have on both language use and the culture for which it is a vehicle. If self-translation is symptomatic of writing under “minoritized” conditions, the practice of “relay translation” may indicate an unhelpful isolation and even solipsism when writing from a “majoritized” position. The writer in a “minoritized” language displays an enviable degree of “linguistic permeability” which one would seek in vain for with many writers in the English-speaking world. Given my own situation in Glasgow of the 1960s and 1970s, Gaelic, rather than being a language in need of rescuing, presented an invaluable opportunity for the poetry I needed to write. Resisting its allure would have been senseless.

Having recently published my sixth collection of poems in Scottish Gaelic, with facing translations into English mostly by a fellow Gaelic poet from a younger generation, Niall O’Gallagher,¹ the editors of the volume agreed with me that perhaps the most useful contribution I could make, rather than a strictly academic essay, would be honest and open reflection about my own practice as a Gaelic poet. So this is what I intend to offer.

¹ Crisdean MacIlleBhàin, *Ceum air Cheum: Cruinneachadh de Dhàintean nas Fhaide / Step by Step: A Book of Longer Poems* (Stornoway: Acair, 2019).

At the same time, terminology is important, not only as a supportive and illuminating grid along which to plot the points one wishes to make, but because terminology itself not infrequently decides what it is possible to say. I want to begin by sharing my reservations about the term “minority languages.” This can also help lead into an explanation of why choosing to write poetry in Scottish Gaelic offers undeniable advantages which are not always predictable in nature.

Probably the reservations can best be grounded by reference to specific cases. Zsófia Balla, a Hungarian poet who lives some ten minutes’ walk away from me in Budapest, recently celebrated her seventieth birthday. The event was marked by the publication of her collected poems to date.² She was born in 1949, in the Transylvanian city of Cluj. Transylvania has formed part of Romania since the widespread redrawing of national boundaries which took place in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the First World War. Until the mid-1950s, however, Cluj remained a predominantly Hungarian-speaking city. Hungarians refer to it as Kolozsvár.

Being Jewish, both Balla’s parents were sent to concentration camps during the Second World War, her father to Mauthausen and her mother to Auschwitz. She has told me that after they returned, her father gave her mother an edition of the poems of Goethe, as if to indicate that what they had lived through could not eradicate their entitlement to participate in a larger scale German-language culture not defined by Nazi ideology. In Cluj, Balla worked on music programmes for Hungarian-language radio and published six books of poetry, in a minority language and as a minority language writer. Since moving to Budapest in 1991, she has published five more collections in the same language. These, however, were neither written in a minority language nor were they the work of a minority language writer. What had changed? Not the language used, but the situation of the poet. The implication is that being “minority” is not an intrinsic characteristic of a language, but refers to the situation in which it is used. Under specific circumstances, many languages are capable of becoming, or ceasing to be, minority languages.

Starting in 2014, I have so far published four books of poetry translated directly into English from the Russian of Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941), who nowadays takes her rightful place alongside Mandelstam, Pasternak, and Akhmatova to form a glorious, outstanding quartet towering over Russian poetry of the first half of the twentieth century. It was not always so. For decades, Tsvetaeva was a marginalized writer much of whose work could not be published or republished during the Soviet era. She herself, in a letter to Yury

² Zsófia Balla, *Az élet két fele – Versek 1965-2019* (Budapest: Pesti Kalligram, 2019).

Ivask dated 4 April 1933, speaks of her paradoxical status of marginal centrality in an almost exultant fashion: "If I have always lived outside the riverbed of culture, that may be because it flowed THROUGH ME."³

From December 1925 until her departure by boat from Le Havre for the Soviet Union in June 1939, Tsvetaeva and her family lived in various Parisian suburbs, often in conditions of appalling deprivation. She returned to Russia in the wake of her husband Sergey Efron who, an officer in the White Army during the Russian civil war, had in the 1930s become a Stalinist agent. During that decade, Tsvetaeva began showing characteristics which are typical of a writer in a "minority" language. She translated her own poetry into French and sought publication for it unsuccessfully. At the time of the Pushkin anniversary celebrations in 1937, she prepared for publication French translations of several of his poems, while also publishing her own cycle of "Poems to Pushkin," written in 1931.⁴ Her notebooks of the time have extended passages in French rather than in Russian, tempting one to speak of an invasion of her writing space by the language she heard spoken around her and which dominated her day to day life. The second part of the last volume of poetry she published in her lifetime, *After Russia* (1928), has an eloquent epigraph taken from an essay by Montaigne: "Remember the man who, asked why he took so much trouble over an art which would come to hardly anybody's notice, answered: 'A few are enough for me. One is enough for me. Not one is enough.'"⁵

Tsvetaeva faced not only the increasing impossibility of publishing what she wrote, but also the extreme hypothesis of her writing not encountering a single reader. The implication is that, given the appropriate circumstances, even Russian can function as a "minority language" used by a "minority language writer."

Speaking about "minoritized languages" is slightly better, given the implication that this is something which happens to a language, something that is done to it, rather than being an innate quality possessed by the language itself. In my opinion, self-translation is characteristic of poets working in a language which has been assigned minority status within specific parameters. It is not something undertaken spontaneously or voluntarily, but a strategy adopted for reasons of expediency, of immediate, practical utility. Until the early 1990s, in

³ Marina Tsvetaeva, *Pis'ma 1933-1936* (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 2016) 44. All translations from languages other than English are by the author. References to the original are included in the footnotes.

⁴ Simon Karlinsky, *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, Her World, and Her Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 218.

⁵ Marina Tsvetaeva, *After Russia. The Second Notebook*, trans. Christopher Whyte (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2018) 39, 120.

Scotland it was impossible in 90% of cases to secure publication for poetry in Gaelic unless the author him- or herself accompanied it with an English translation. Work was accepted for publication on the basis of this translation alone, since hardly any magazine editors or publishers were capable of reading texts in Gaelic. Wilson McLeod has summarized the damage done by this practice in his insightful essay "Packaging Gaelic Poetry."⁶ Ronald Black devotes the closing pages of the introduction to his anthology of twentieth-century Gaelic poetry to this debate.⁷

The Russian poet Joseph Brodsky (1940-95), who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1990, made something of a name for himself with his self-translations into English. Evaluations of these, as of the original poems he went on to write in his second language, remain contradictory. What is certain is that the strategy emerged in circumstances he did nothing to create. On 4 June 1972, KGB officers put Brodsky on a plane from Leningrad to Vienna Airport, where he was met by none other than W.H. Auden himself.⁸ The barely veiled allusion to suicidal thoughts in the poem which takes its name from this crucial time, "The Year 1972," indicates the toll this sudden relocation took on him:

Even when the last wheels of the train
have clattered thundering past my belt,
the flight of imagination does not die away.⁹

I will return later to Brodsky and what he says about the experience of writing poetry in a language nobody around him speaks.

One of the advantages for writers who use a minoritized language is what I will call "linguistic permeability." Not just their everyday realities, but their reading and their minds are inhabited by an interaction between languages which can never be settled definitively in favour of one or the other. Ideally they will always be in dialogue. This is one of the reasons why I will argue, following in the footsteps of Foucault's dynamic understandings of relationships of power as inherently unstable, that in this case, too, the apparently disadvantaged position carries with it undeniable advantages.

⁶ Wilson McLeod, "Packaging Gaelic Poetry," *Chapman*, 89-90 (1998): 149-51.

⁷ Ronald Black (ed.), *An Tuil* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999) lxiv-lxvi.

⁸ For further details see Lev Loseev, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, trans. Jane Ann Miller (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2011) 136-38.

⁹ Iosif Brodskiy, *Stikhotvoreniya i poemy*, Tom 1 (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Pushkinskogo doma, Izdatel'stvo Vita Nova, 2011) 334.

In the United Kingdom at the present day, the practice of what is referred to as “relay translation” has, if not quite ousted it, then relegated “old-fashioned” translation, where a single person reads a poem in one language and makes a version of it in another, to a marginal position. The authoritative review *Modern Poetry in Translation*, originally founded by Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort, presents material in such a way that it is not always easy to work out which language the original was written in or, when two names are given, which roles the collaborators took.

The commonest method is for the better known partner, often an established poet in English, to receive a literal version, a “crib,” from which they will then make a “poetic” English version. It is hardly surprising that the result often conveys little information about the metre or rhyming of the original, given the predominance of free verse translations. A recent workshop on Lithuanian poetry featured on the magazine’s website is advertised as “open to all poets and translators, regardless of their level of proficiency with the original language,” on top of which “a literal translation is provided beneath, along with notes about the poem to help you create a version of the piece in English.”¹⁰

There are at least two worrying features of this practice. One is the almost invariable overshadowing or occlusion of the less well-known collaborator, the person who knows both languages and did the work of “translating” in the original sense. Another is an implication that contemporary English language poets in the United Kingdom and in North America may lack any significant degree of “linguistic permeability,” given that their actual exposure to poetry in languages other than their own may be minimal. It is therefore possible that one of the disadvantages of using a “majoritized” language is a certain degree of linguistic and cultural isolation.

Among the most clamorous instances of “relay” translation has been the publication by Scottish poet Don Paterson in 2006 of *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke’s Die Sonette an Orpheus*, a book which, while highly praised, also gave rise to a great deal of controversy. Although the statements Paterson makes in his appended “Fourteen Notes on the Version” are not always simple to interpret, he does at one point say: “Until now I’ve resisted the following admission on the grounds of self-incrimination – but while I can read a very little of a few languages, I am simply no linguist of any kind. While this would naturally make ‘translation’ an impossible project, it does not, I believe, rule out the version.” He then continues: “If I waver (as I constantly do) in this belief, I can always supply

¹⁰ “Lithuanian Poetry Workshop,” *Modern Poetry in Translation*, <https://modernpoetryintranslation.com/workshop/lithuanian-poetry-workshop> (accessed 23 April 2020).

myself with a couple of stones' worth of evidence from my shelves that, in the translation of poetry, even a very *good* acquaintance with the source language is no guarantee of anything at all."¹¹ He further adds: "At least the ignorant monoglots tend to triangulate their version from multiple cribs for fear of missing anything, for fear of missing everything; whereas the fluent tend to work from one, their own – which might be no better (and is often worse) than those available from other sources."¹²

While it does seem that Paterson was able to make at least limited reference to the source text in German, the implication is that he consulted the available translations in English as a basis for arriving at his own version. The numbers Rilke placed at the head of each sonnet have disappeared. With the vagueness all too often characteristic of "relay" translations, Paterson supplies each item with a title of his own devising for which there is no basis in the German original. As frequently happens, none of those who produced the existing versions he would appear to have made use of is actually named. Differently from what happens with translation in the old-fashioned sense, no new material has been brought over from one language to another. "Relay" translation as exemplified here is a solipsistic process involving materials already existing in the target language. No poem has crossed a language boundary: for that a translator of the older type will always be required.

Could it be possible to posit a spectrum with, at one end, "relay" translation of the Paterson type, lacking the "linguistic permeability" spoken of earlier? And at the other, self-translation where the original text in a temporarily or definitively "minoritized" language risks being eclipsed by its translation into a "majoritized" language? Contemporary Gaelic poets Aonghas MacNeacail and Meg Bateman have both produced Gaelic and English versions of a poem practically at the same time, which tend to assert themselves as equally valid. Indeed, Meg Bateman's trajectory would seem to have led her to produce poems exclusively in English, lacking the need for or the pretext of an accompanying rendering in Gaelic.¹³

Though I have no time to pursue the point in depth here, it is likely that poetry is at least as much an "interlingual" as it is an "intralingual" activity. One may in fact blend intriguingly into the other. In so far as a body of poems tests the limits of the language in which it is written, this will frequently involve

¹¹ Don Paterson, *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) 81-82.

¹² Paterson 81-82.

¹³ *Soirbheas / Fair Wind* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007) presents facing texts in Gaelic and English, whereas the poems in *Transparencies* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2013) are in English only.

colliding with another, connected language, or else exploring swathes of language which are generally unfamiliar or have fallen out of use. Consider the role of “foreign” words in a medium where immediate comprehension is not a major concern – where, indeed, understanding too quickly may rob the experience of sense or value. Poems are not intended to be understood – exhausted – in any conventional way. They repeatedly present “semantic black holes” which the reader has to get personally involved in assigning a meaning to. This often happens on the basis of repeated readings, which can allow a progressive, never quite definitive evaluation of the context. The implication would be that, rather than being engaged in a Darwinian struggle for the survival of the fittest, in which the demise of one would signal a triumph for the other, languages are in fact mutually interdependent. They nurture one another’s existence by providing impenetrable, dense linguistic material in immediate proximity. If a “majoritized” language stands at one end of the spectrum, where lack of connectedness risks culminating in a sort of unapologetic, barely conscious solipsism, in which one figure occupies the stage to the exclusion of all others, then a “minoritized” language, especially an endangered one, would be at the opposite end, where “linguistic permeability” reaches a level that may even threaten its continued existence.

It does not feel quite right to label Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) as either a German or an Austrian poet. He grew up as part of the German-speaking minority in Prague at a time when the city was already overwhelmingly Czech-speaking. The end of the First World War found him entitled only to a Czechoslovak passport, issued by a state which had not existed at any previous point in his life. Tsvetaeva wrote to him on 2 August 1926:

What are you in fact, Rainer? Not a German, even if – the whole of Germany! Not a Czech, though born in the Czech lands (NB! born in a country that did not yet exist – that fits), not an Austrian, since Austria *has been*, and you – *will be*! Is that not splendid? *You* – and no country! “Le grand poète tchéco-slovaque,” as the Paris newspapers put it. Rainer, in the end, are you a Slovak? I have to laugh.¹⁴

The years from 1918 to 1922 were spent in the protracted search for a place where he could settle down and complete work on the series of elegies he had

¹⁴ *Rilke und Russland. Briefe Erinnerungen Gedichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1986) 417. The German “Böhme,” “Böhmen” is here translated “Czech,” “the Czech lands.” An alternative translation could be “Bohemian,” “Bohemia.”

begun in Duino, north of Trieste, in 1912. In the end, a Swiss patron and friend, Werner Reinhart, bought for the poet an isolated medieval tower at Muzot in the Valais region of Switzerland where, at the start of February 1922, Rilke was able not only to complete the elegies, but also wrote down, as if from dictation, the sequence of more than fifty *Sonnets to Orpheus* of whose importance he only gradually became aware. This is one of the great creative success stories of the twentieth century.

In the last years of his life – he died at the end of 1926 aged only fifty-one – Rilke was engaged in making extensive translations from the work of the French poet Paul Valéry. He also produced two volumes of his own in French, *Quatrain valaisans* and *Vergers*, a departure which provoked consternation in conservative-minded patriotic circles in Germany. His last important love relationship was with the Breslau-born artist Baladine Klossowska, mother of the painter Balthus (1908-2001). He christened her “Merline.” Her gift to him of an engraving of Orpheus by Cima da Conegliano may well have served to inspire the sonnet sequence. The letters they exchanged, published as *Correspondance 1920-1926*, are in both German and French, to the extent that turning the page and coming upon the word “Hier,” one is momentarily uncertain whether to interpret this as the French for “yesterday,” or the German word for “here” – an indication of the “linguistic permeability” which typified these years for Rilke. The Swiss canton in which he resided was overwhelmingly French-speaking.

I hope I may be forgiven for quoting at length from a letter the poet wrote from Muzot, on 17 March 1922, to Margot Gräfin Sizzo. Her family had roots in Picardy but her grandfather moved to Hungary and her mother, Livia Semsay, belonged to the Hungarian nobility:

No one would ever think of thrusting a rope-maker, a carpenter or a cobbler from his trade out “into life” so they could become a better rope-maker, carpenter or cobbler; musicians, painters and sculptors are also better left to get on with what they are doing. But with writers the artisan element seems so insignificant, so acquired *to start with* (everyone can write), that many people (perhaps Dehmel too!) imagine those involved in it will immediately descend into empty games, if left too much alone with their occupation! But what a misunderstanding! God knows, writing is just as “difficult” a “trade,” all the more so given that to start with the material of other arts has been removed from daily use, while the task of a poet brings with it the surprising demand fundamentally to separate his word from words in straightforward intercourse and understanding. *No* word in a poem (and here I mean each “and” or “the”) corresponds to the

similarly sounding word as used in conversation; less bound by convention, defined by its relations, the configuration it assumes in verse or in artistic prose, changes the very core of its nature, rendering it worthless, useless in straightforward intercourse, intangible and permanent... The degree to which Dehmel's view of things differed also in this regard became startlingly apparent in a minor controversy that took place when we met by chance many years ago. What Dehmel (who always showed a sort of expectant concern for me, as I later realized) wanted to bring up with me was nothing other than my constantly residing abroad. There was no way I could have explained to him all the reasons I had (his position later on, in wartime, for the first time showed me clearly how little he would have understood), so I limited myself to saying, among other things – by no means taking pride in it, instead, if you wish, acknowledging it as a weakness – that when I was working, I preferred to hear no German (spoken most of the time so badly and so lazily!) around me, but rather to be surrounded by another language which was familiar and sympathetic to me as a means of everyday communication: thanks to this isolation (which he may well have perceived as hugely “unpatriotic”) German *in me*, I told him, acquired a particular concentration and clarity; removed from all daily use, I experienced it as a material fit for my purposes, magnificent (and how magnificent: perhaps only being able to call to the same extent on *Russian* could offer a greater range, even broader contrasts of expression!). Dehmel responded to my assurance with such amazement that I added, jokingly, that a sculptor, for example, would find it painful and unpleasant if the clay he modelled were at the same time everywhere smeared around clumsily and carelessly for the purpose of reaching an agreement or for other practical ends... Both of us laughed, and the conversation went no further in this direction.¹⁵

Rilke's description of the advantages of writing in a language which is not being used around him in the everyday corresponds closely to his situation in the Valais. It is also, however, remarkably apt for the situation of someone like myself using a “minoritized language” which, if he goes out onto the street to do some shopping, is not the one he will hear on the lips of the people he rubs shoulders with. In Scottish cities, Gaelic is “another” language, wrested from

¹⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe an Gräfin Sizzo 1921-1926* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1985) 28-30. The italics are retained from the original.

daily use, so that the poet does not have to undertake the laborious task Rilke describes, of selecting and so to speak purifying his material in order to insert it in a different context. Especially intriguing is Rilke's insistence that the most banal words, such as "the" or "that" or "here," mean and function differently when placed in a poem. To a significant degree any poem is written in "another language" with respect to the language of every day. His intuitive perception is not so distant from the theoretical formulation of the Russian semiotician Yury Lotman, when he argues in *The Structure of Poetic Language* that poems are made by subjecting the words of common parlance to another, secondary set of rules which characterize the specific language of poetry.¹⁶

If Rilke's premises are accepted, then it can be argued that someone working with a "minoritized language" finds themselves in the ideal conditions for the making of poetry. They can indulge in the private dialogue with the language which is so important to Joseph Brodsky's conception of what poetry means – the language writing the poet, rather than the poet manipulating the language. An anecdote may not be out of place here. Roughly a decade ago, I found myself walking home along the pebbled streets of the north Italian town Mantua at lunchtime, food shopping in my hands. Italian provincial towns continue to breathe with the centuries old rhythm according to which all activity halts around one o'clock, to be resumed around five. In a metropolis like Rome, this means that inhabitants enjoy the privilege of having, not two rush hours every day, but four. In front of me was a young woman I gradually overtook, talking in resounding tones on her mobile phone. It struck me that the language she used was not hers. It consisted of snippets of common phrases, stitched together in a fashion which meant her utterances had nothing surprising or original about them. And it occurred to me that the task of a poet is precisely to combine words in ways that have not happened before. They need to be unprecedented. This implies that a new poem always takes its first readers unawares. Nothing has prepared them for dealing with it, for interpreting it adequately. The only way to learn that is to return again and again to the poem, which in this sense already contains the blueprint of its audience, an audience the poem itself takes on the task of creating.

All poetry of high quality has this characteristic of redeploying and redefining words, as often as not dredging up, exploring and exploiting areas of language which have fallen into disuse. Here again, what the poet in a "minoritized"

¹⁶ As I find the English translation confusing and hard to follow, I will reference the Italian version. Jurij M. Lotman, *La struttura del testo poetico*, ed. Eridano Bazzarelli, trans. Eridano Bazzarelli, Erika Klein, Gabriella Schiaffino (Milan: Mursia, 1972) 28-31.

language does can be viewed as a heightened version of what every poet does. Close to the end of his 2685-line long, intellectually and philosophically challenging poem in Scots *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978) writes

Nor cared gin truth frae me ootsprung
In ne'er a leed o' ony tongue
That ever in a heid was hung.¹⁷

He is indeed acknowledging disarmingly that, at the time of writing, an audience capable of dealing with the immensely ambitious range of Scots he uses did not exist. Still today, readers literate in English – Scots is still not a medium of instruction even in primary schools in Scotland – need patiently to consult an extensive glossary if they are to make sense of his lines. But he is surely also referring to the way in which any innovative new poem finds its readers chronically unprepared. Here again, the characteristic of a “minoritized” language, by which even educated readers from the territory in which it is used must struggle to gain access to texts written in it, is simply a heightened version of what characterizes all poetry. As if the quality of being poetry had been augmented to the “nth degree.”

In a passage from his conversations with Solomon Volkov, recorded in the course of fifteen years, which appeared in English translation in 1989, Brodsky speaks of the advantages of living in exile, and of writing poetry in a language quite different from that of his surroundings:

We felt ourselves to be in a somewhat attenuated relationship with the system and the state – and not even the state and the system so much as the people around us. I'd like to say this, too, to clarify our thoughts about who feels like a stranger and where. The point is this. I remember back in Leningrad, I wrote a poem and went out afterward in the evening to Liteiny Prospect and I felt – and not even simply felt but knew for a fact – that I was among people with whom I had very little in common. Just fifteen minutes before my head had been filled with what for one reason or another had never occurred to them – and obviously wasn't

¹⁷ Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ed. Kenneth Buthlay (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987) 174, lines 2410-12. English translation: “And did not care if truth burst out from me / in a language not spoken by any tongue / that ever hung in a head.”

about to any time soon. And meanwhile, these were my fellow countrymen. When you go outside with the same feeling in New York, then here at least you find justification for this, since in this instance the passersby speak in a different language, right? So that the feeling of strangeness isn't as painful as the feeling of strangeness in your own homeland. Don't forget this when you hear all these endless, bitter-tasting arguments about the dreadful drama of writers in exile, because this is not in fact so. I even think that the audience here, in the West, for writers, musicians and dancers from Russia or Eastern Europe is a more or less adequate audience generally speaking, and frequently even exceeds what these people had back home. I often catch myself thinking this.¹⁸

He strikingly describes his current situation, living in Morton Street in New York's Greenwich Village, as less alienating with respect to the years when he wrote poetry in the Soviet Union.

The agendas I have highlighted so far may seem too abstract and generalized, applicable as they are to a variety of situations in which a "minoritized" language, or a "majoritized" language in a situation of "minoritization" (!) is being used for poetry. It therefore remains for me to say a little more about the specific relevance and advantages of choosing to write poetry in Gaelic in a Scottish context at the present. I myself spent my first eighteen years living in a tenement flat in the West End of Glasgow, then lived between the ages of roughly thirty-five and fifty-three mainly in Edinburgh's New Town, commuting through to Glasgow several times a week during the university teaching terms.

Social experience of language in Scotland is typically macaronic. In other words, the "linguistic permeability" discussed earlier is a feature of the ways in which people speak to one another, something that requires to be negotiated skilfully if one is to function effectively in social interaction. Let me give a personal example. Starting in 2012, a Slovenian friend spent a year taking a Masters in Photography at Glasgow School of Art. He rented a flat which needed to be redecorated and furnished before he could move in. The friend he was staying with while getting things ready had a cleaning lady named Karen who in her turn knew a handiman named Jack ready to undertake the painting work. Karen spoke a form of Glasgow dialect which was comprehensible to the Slovenian. Jack's dialect, however, he found impenetrable. I therefore watched in fascination

¹⁸ Solomon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New York: The Free Press, 1998) 276.

while Karen acted as interpreter between Jack and the Slovenian, rephrasing what he said in her own lighter form of Glasgow speech so that the Slovenian could then answer in English, agreeing how much he would pay for the work and when it would be done.

The writer Fionn MacColla (born Tom Wilson, 1910-1975), who became fluent in Gaelic and worked as a schoolteacher, then headmaster in a Gaelic-speaking area in the islands, offers a memorable description in his autobiography *Ro fhada mar seo a tha mi / Too Long in This Condition* of how he learned about the existence of a language called Gaelic:

On the occasion – one of the two or three most momentous of my life: for which I was not in any sense prepared; it was in the most complete sense casual – the family, my parents, older sister and myself, had just finished lunch. I now know it was a fine warm day. My father with a glance out the window at the sky, stretched himself in characteristic fashion and spoke a few words to himself. I was instantly aware that I was standing about five childish paces inside the door of the room on the right on the first floor at 104 Murray Street, Montrose, rooted to the spot by a life-shaking experience, that my head came up to about my father's watch-chain, that the sky was sun-filled and it was gloriously warm, that my father smelt faintly of leather, and had just caused the whole of my personal predicament and that of my contemporaries to become devastatingly clear, and that it was so *inevitable that it seemed I had always known it*. Although I knew perfectly well what had happened I said, "What was that?" My father, caught somewhat off balance, said off-handedly, "Oh, that's a language they speak in some parts of Scotland." Then seeing my interest he relented. "I said, *Nach i tha blath an-diugh*; that means, Isn't it warm to-day. Then there's *Nach i tha fliuch an-diugh* – Isn't it wet to-day." He looked at his watch and went off through the door back to his work.¹⁹

The terms in which McColla goes on to elucidate this key experience are capable of at least two levels of interpretation:

The Proper language (known at some time or other as English) was completely foreign to my soul and sensibility, having a cramping effect,

¹⁹ Fionn MacColla, *Ro fhada mar seo a tha mi / Too Long in This Condition* (Thurso: Caithness Books, 1975) 55.

an effect of making shallow and artificial. I loved by contrast our language (nowadays known as Scots or Lallans) in which I felt my soul and sensibility free to move about and express themselves – *almost* to the full. Therein lay the crux. I had been conscious of the Proper language *as more totally foreign to me than the mere speaking of Scots as my first and loved language would have explained.*

That postulated therefore that there must be somewhere another language capable of naturally doing *to the full* what Scots did certainly, but apparently *not quite to the full*. In other words I realised that Scots pointed to and implied another language which was ours too, but within which we should be able as it were to bathe and disport our sensibilities and this time completely and comprehensively to the uttermost that was in us.²⁰

On the one hand, it is tempting, indeed facile, to read MacColla's discovery in terms of a Romantic nationalist ideology according to which English, the imposed language of colonial oppressors, stifles and debilitates effective expression, which can at last be rendered possible thanks to the discovery of the "true" language, the language people in Scotland by rights "ought to" speak. On the other, we can simply say that the child MacColla, evidently possessed of unusual linguistic gifts, had an acute and accurate perception of the complexities and strata of linguistic usage within the human environment where he moved. This meant that a place was already available and waiting for Gaelic, which his father's inadvertently dropping an innocent phrase allowed his son to cast in the role appropriate for it.

My own background was in a lower-middle class family in the Catholic immigration in Glasgow with parents who were both teachers. That section of the population is largely Irish in origin, though my paternal grandfather's people came from Argyllshire and would almost certainly have been Gaelic-speakers at a point in the not too distant past. Sundays in the family were dedicated to my parents' perusal of no fewer than five Sunday newspapers, in a silence hardly less reverent than that which accompanied the priest's sermon when we attended Mass earlier in the day. Time and again my mother came upon an abstruse or learned term she would quote aloud and discuss with my father. My understanding is that she was still in the process of perfecting her English, despite being a monoglot in the language. Her social and cultural background meant she perceived it as a precious acquisition, a privilege which could only be

²⁰ MacColla 55.

maintained thanks to diligent and repeated application. Many years later, when a dear friend of massive erudition, perhaps the greatest living specialist in placenames studies in Scotland, visited us at home, he consistently used “Aye” rather than “Yes.” On his part this could be classified as an affectation. Nonetheless, I noted how my parents cringed each time they heard the word. Dialect was banned within our home. Using it would have risked undermining the social mobility in an upwards direction to which they both, my mother in particular, were committed. It was therefore perfectly understandable that, when I told her age eighteen of my intention to study Gaelic, my mother should have said: “I can’t understand what makes you want to learn such a barbaric language!” In my specific case, Gaelic therefore additionally brought with it all the glamour of maternal prohibition.

I wish to mention one further aspect of the “linguistic permeability,” the “macaronic experience” which characterizes language in present-day Scotland. For many years, a tram no. 64 travelled to the destination Auchenshuggle. Other destinations included Sandyhills and King’s Park, but also Carmunnock or Riddrie. Places like Kilsyth, Gartcosh or Airdrie were not far away. On the lips of Scottish people Gaelic pursues a “phantom” existence in placenames which might be perceived as nonsensical, were it not that they represent survivals of the “other” language once used in the area. I myself cannot forget climbing to a viewpoint in the Trossachs age ten or eleven and finding that I was unable to say the names of any of the surrounding peaks. Without exception, these continued to exist only in their original Gaelic form.

So my own agenda when it comes to writing poetry in Gaelic is not concerned with language preservation or revitalizing national identity. Not really, either, with bringing the language back into everyday use and creating a secure place for it in the procedures of ordinary life. As a gay man belonging to the generation I was born into, creating a family with children was out of the question. So neither have I been concerned with passing it on to the next generation, ensuring there are new speakers, or teaching the language in an academic environment. Quite simply, it was crucial to me to write poetry, and Gaelic proved the most appropriate language for me to write it in. A sure way of contributing to the ongoing vitality of a language is to create texts in it which people will want to read, if possible extending beyond the specific circle of those who know the language. Rather than me coming to the assistance of Gaelic, and helping to ensure its survival for a while longer, the existence of Gaelic represented a huge opportunity for me. I hope I have managed to demonstrate that the reasons for using it, and the associated advantages, involve a range of agendas which stretches much further than is generally thought or understood to be the case.